

*Second in a series of articles recalling the vehicles that were and are uniquely Marine.*

## Battle Honors of the Marine Amphibian II. Offensive Defense

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**LVT(1)s of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion bringing supplies ashore during the landing on Guadalcanal, 7 August 1942. Note World War I model water-cooled .30 caliber machinegun. Note also canvas cover used to cover cargo compartment in high surf. The LVT(1)s were completely unarmored and were armed with three .30 caliber and one .50 caliber machineguns.**

Ten weeks after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had reached the "The Southern Resources Area" and were establishing strongpoints to safeguard their prize. At home, the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions, though below authorized strength, each had to detach an infantry regiment to garrison Samoa. While this hampered their buildup, they could rely on established practices to overcome difficulties. The

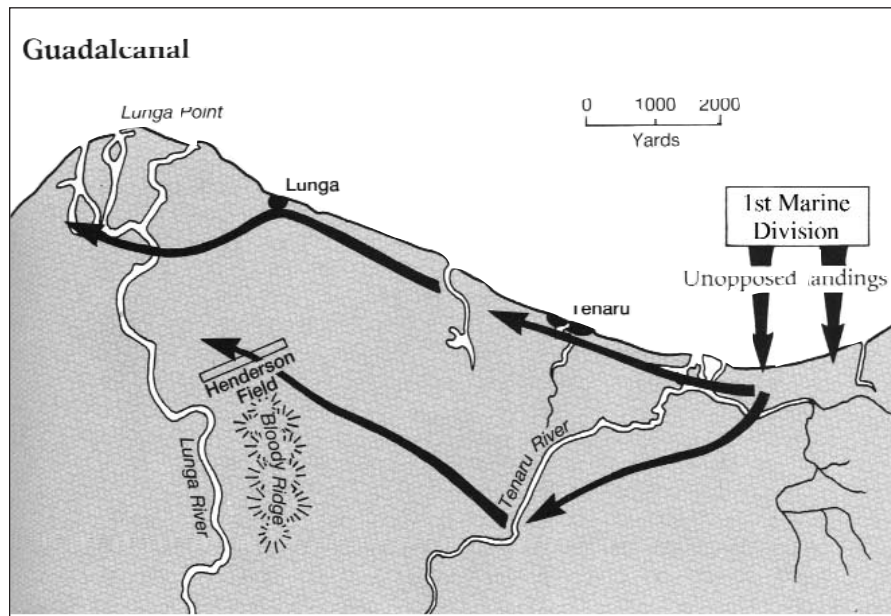
amphibian tractor (amtrac) units had no comparable guidance; only the decision to organize them as division motor transport battalions with 10 LVT(1)s in the headquarters and 30 in each of 3 lettered companies, these last to be attached for operations one per infantry regiment. The 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion was activated accordingly on 16 February; the 2d followed on 18 March.



**Amtracs used as pontoons over which wooden bridges have been built. Speed is of the essence during the initial landing hence the use of field expedients to span waterways.**

In May 1942, Japanese naval forces from Rabaul entered the Coral Sea. One group seized Tulagi and started building an airfield on nearby Guadalcanal. The Port Moresby invasion group, however, turned back when it lost the carrier *Shoho*. The latter was a strategic victory for America, but the Guadalcanal airfield threatened the communications with Australia, whose security was one of the Commander in Chief Pacific's two principal missions. The other, "holding the Hawaii-Midway line and maintaining its communications with the west coast," was decided off Midway on 4 June when Japan lost four carriers and 250 aircraft. This cleared the

*See Amphibians On Parade, p. 101.*



way for U.S. forces to regain the lower Solomons and mount an offensive against Rabaul where Japan had five airfields, an excellent fleet anchorage and, reportedly, the best brothel east of the Dutch Indies.

On 14 June 1942, the lead echelon of the 1st Marine Division arrived in Wellington, New Zealand anticipating a lengthy training period. Twelve days later MajGen Alexander A. Vandergrift learned his division was to undertake the first Allied offensive of the war. Controlled chaos followed, during which arriving ships, administratively loaded, were emptied and combat loaded, often under bone-chilling rains. Despite all adversities, the force sortied as scheduled on 22 July. It met up with the 1st Raiders, the 2d Marines with Company A, 2d Amtrac Battalion and other reinforcements in the Fijis, where all joined in a rehearsal of little value. That ended, 19,000 Marines crowded in 23 transports set course for Tulagi and Guadalcanal.

The 1st Division's LVT(1)s, tasked to provide transportation services, had been embarked early. Thus, all preparations for combat, to include painting over their factory-bright silver, were accomplished in the ships' holds. There, too, four amtracs were fitted with wooden ramps to serve as bridges on Guadalcanal. Strange to add that, although a reef fronted the landing beach at Tulagi, boats were used and the Marines had to wade ashore. Fortunately, all landings on 7 August were unopposed. The next day, however, Rube Dailey and brothers Olin and Glen Darnel, manning an amtrac of the 2d Battalion, stormed ashore on Gavutu with guns blazing to cover the evacuation of several wounded Marines.

Units of the 2d Amtrac Battalion left with the transports on 9 August; the 1st Amtrac Battalion remained until the end of the year. Initially committed to help the Shore Party disperse the supplies and equipment dumped ashore by the departing Navy, amtracs were also used to position artillery and support advancing infantry. Thus engaged, Sgt Cantrell's amtrac reached the airfield and nearby encampment on 8 August, where Cantrell found a stock of Asahi beer. After careful testing to ensure the wily Japanese had not poisoned the brew, he generously shared what remained. Soon after, the 1st Amtrac Battalion was integrated into the defense perimeter established around the airfield, from where it engaged in endless hauling tasks that diminished only as its vehicles broke down. These were not a total loss. With three machine-guns per amtrac, they were a welcome source of parts and replacement weapons for infantry units.



**Another view of the LVT(1) clearly showing two of the machineguns. The vehicle was capable of land and water speeds of 12 and 6 miles per hour, respectively, and ranges of 120 miles on land and 50 miles in the water.**

The Japanese repeatedly sought to destroy the Marine beachhead. Antipersonnel bombs and naval shells ranging to 14-inch size entertained at night, bomber formations routinely arrived as the Marines were eating one of the two meals per day their meager supplies allowed, and the perimeter defenses were periodically attacked by ground forces. Yet, the Marines held. In December, the 1st Division, decimated by combat casualties and tropical diseases, was relieved and resettled in Australia. The 2d Division, incrementally deployed to Guadalcanal, remained until the island was secured in February and then sailed for New Zealand. The lower Solomons were back in Allied hands, and two amtrac battalions had started a "can do" tradition.

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